

# Motivating Challenging Employees

Patrick K. Lynch

In the medical technology field, challenges are everywhere, from changing standards and regulations to training requirements, hospital policies, and often shrinking budgets. But for managers, there is perhaps nothing that makes the job harder than challenging employees who are less than ideal in some way. The old 80-20 rule often applies: 20% of employees consume 80% of a manager's supervisory time. At the worst, a difficult employee upsets your customers and damages the morale of the rest of the team. Even moderately challenging employees can eat up your time and lower the productivity of the department as a whole.

So what is a challenging employee, and more importantly, what can you do about it other than letting somebody go? As a contrast, let's first explore what makes an "ideal employee." Of course, very few people fit into these black and white categories—you may have somebody who gives their all but can be rude at times, or somebody going through a bad patch after previously performing well.

Drawing on 30 years of experience supervising both technical and administrative staff, I define an ideal employee as one who has a good attitude, is pleasant to be around, possesses the technical skills to do their job, carries out the job duties without prompting, and turns out a large volume of work. The ideal employee is where they are supposed to be when they are supposed to be there. He or she goes beyond traditional roles and responsibilities if asked—or even without being asked. The ideal employee also is not territorial about customers or knowledge and shares information freely with co-workers. Finally, the ideal employee is tolerant of different ways of working and doesn't try to push his or her way of doing things on others in the shop. In short, it is someone you wish you could clone.

What, then, is a challenging employee? They come in all shapes and sizes. The thought of cloning them sends shivers down your spine. The attributes of the challenging employee may be divided into two categories: personal traits and work performance. (What we are not going to

## Check Points

How can you motivate your employees?

- ✓ Provide them with new opportunities for training and development.
- ✓ Give them new projects or more responsibility.
- ✓ Promote teamwork.
- ✓ Let them know how you define success and provide them with specifics on how to reach their goals.

talk about here is technical skills. Either employees have them or they don't, and they can either develop them or they can't.)

Examples of challenging behaviors are:

- Doesn't work well with others.
- Argues about everything.
- Fails to meet expectations.
- Great at some things, weak at others.
- Attendance issues.
- Failure to follow procedures.
- Difficult to work in the same proximity (noisy, smelly perfume, loud music, body odor, disruptive in some way).
- Is a slow worker.
- Complains about everything.
- Instigates dissatisfaction.

Whatever the specific circumstances of the challenging employee, his or her presence has the net effect of bringing down the performance, morale, or success of the team. These employees may be managed, corrected, eliminated, or simply tolerated, and the choice of action depends upon several factors. How long have they worked for the organization? How bad is their behavior? How easy are they to replace? What are their prospects for future improvement? There are certain ethical and legal responsibilities that employers have to employees, which vary with each company and culture.

In my experience, the way to address challenging

behaviors is to have a very candid, but sensitive, conversation with the person in question. It should follow the standard protocols of counseling, which are to begin with a personal connection, talk about a positive experience or accomplishment, move on to address the problem area, gain agreement and buy-in, plan a course of action, and close with an optimistic vision for the future.

Depending upon the gravity and urgency of the situation, it can be a two-way conversation or a one-way lecture from supervisor to employee. If there are specific actions that are non-negotiable, such as attendance, those should be made very clear and discussion of them not allowed. And the time line for demonstrating change must be specifically communicated.

### Motivation

Motivating methods depend in part upon the person who is being asked (told) to change. To motivate someone, you have to know what they value and appeal to those values. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs (physiological needs, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self actualization), there are many character attributes that may be of use in developing a plan for success.

At the top level—self actualization—there is the encouragement to grow personally and professionally. The offer of additional training and opportunities contingent upon the person's ability to successfully modify some offending behaviors often works. Biomed, for example, are particularly susceptible to this type of motivation, because such a large part of their self-identity and professional value is tied up in their technical and knowledge-based skills.

At the next level, many biomed are highly motivated by the idea of raising their self-esteem. This can be accomplished by giving them more responsibility—making them the liaison for a particular department or medical system, for example. The introverted nature of many employees further makes this an excellent motivator.

At the third level, love and belonging are also powerful and much more basic than self-esteem. Cultivating a team, with team behaviors, successes, goals, and rewards, refocuses each member of the team to work toward a longer-range goal. It makes team goals the focus and reframes the individual experiences as less important by stressing sharing and communicating. It also makes the team the regulating body, and makes the discussion of anything that detracts from the team's ability to achieve that success a legitimate topic for discussion.

When it becomes necessary to move to the two lowest levels (safety and security or physiological needs), we begin to move into more serious counseling areas. The motivations become negative rather than positive, and threatening rather than encouraging. If you have to imply or hint that a person's job may be at risk, you have just about lost them anyway. Putting somebody on employment probation is often just a required step in the firing process. It is a very serious process that should only be used when the problems that the person is causing are very serious, or must be corrected in a very short time-frame.

With few exceptions, people are motivated by positives instead of negatives, carrots instead of whips, strokes instead of lashes. If a manager creates a team atmosphere and makes the achievement of team goals the ultimate goal of each individual, most employees can figure out how to meet the expectations and be successful, both for their own good and for the good of the organization. ■

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